

Roomies

by Sheila Julson

"I am NOT a hooker."

"What exactly are you, then?" Marlene raised her slim eyebrows. Her almond shaped eyes and high-cut bangs gave her the appearance of a vintage Barbie doll.

"Well..." I stirred my coffee and looked down. I wasn't sure what to tell my sister. "I guess I'm just a girl down on her luck, but I'm not a hooker. Let me start from the beginning."

It started with Trent. Our new romance started out fun and wild at the beginning, as most new romances do. Then reality set in. Trent became quiet and withdrawn. He suddenly stopped returning my calls. I dropped by his apartment two days in a row and he wasn't there.

"I don't know where he is," Chad, his roommate, told me at the threshold.

Chad didn't really resist when I pushed my way in. Maybe he was too surprised. I looked directly at him. He looked at the floor.

"I think you do know where he is." I parked my ass in the beanbag chair. Trent and I had sex in that chair the week before.

"Come on, Erica. Don't put me on the spot."

I lit a smoke and inhaled deeply. "I have nothing to lose. My grandmother, who is dying of cancer, probably won't make it to the weekend. I lost my job today. I'm two months behind on my rent and I've got nothing but ketchup and one slice of cheese in the 'fridge."

Chad sighed and ran his fingers through his dishwater blonde hair. It was almost the same shade as mine. "You know, you're really putting me in an awkward position."

"Trent IS cheating on me!"

"I didn't say that! I, well..."

He didn't have to say anything. His pacing and squirming said it all. I snuffed out my smoke in a nearby clay ashtray and struggled to get out of the beanbag chair. "I'm sorry for putting you on the spot. I guess I'll just get lost. Didn't mean to bother you."

My hand was on the doorknob. Much of the faux brass coating was chipped off.

"Wait."

I turned.

Chad looked at the floor again. "I, uhh, I have a pizza coming, and maybe we can run to Open Pantry and get a six-pack."

It sounded good — definitely better than going home to see an eviction notice on my door, or to hear a message on my answering machine bearing bad news from the hospital. I craved company at the moment. Yet...

"What if Trent comes home with his floozy? Are you sure you want to witness a catfight?" I asked Chad, and toyed with the costume-jeweled necklace that Trent had given me not long ago. He didn't buy it exclusively for me. He found it at work.

"A cat fight?" Chad sat on the worn plaid couch.

I folded my arms. "Oh yeah, you guys dig that stuff."

"No I don't. Look...there is no floozy...damn, I can't tell you."

There was a rap at the door.

"Ah, food's here." Chad hopped up and flung the door open

Marlene just sat there. She stirred her coffee and did not take her eyes off me.

"Don't look at me like that." I slammed the rest of my java, and almost spat it out. It got cold.

"I suppose you slept with Chad, then."

I played with the laminated triangle card that advertised the pancakes special.

"I supposed you slept with Chad, then," Marlene repeated.

"Yeah, I spent the night there. Trent spent the night somewhere else."

Trent had yet to come home the following day. I left their apartment around noon. Chad didn't want me to leave.

An eviction notice was on my door. Once I got inside, there was also that dreaded message on my answering machine.

"...Erica, it's mom. When you're done carousing for the weekend, call me immediately..."

BEEP!

I gritted my teeth at my mother's flat, forced voice, and threw the clunky secondhand machine to the floor. I savored how it smashed into pieces. It was a piece of shit, anyway

The day after the funeral, my landlord paraded potential new tenants through my place while I packed. A round of temp workers replaced me at my factory assembly job.

With nowhere to go, or nowhere I wanted to go, and my meager possessions in two thrift store suitcases, I gazed at the slick evening street. It had just started to drizzle. Wet leaves stuck to the pavement. Blinking eyes from jack-o-lanterns and Frankenstein yard displays seemed to watch me as I moved on. A motion-activated ghoulish head veiled in creepy cloth let out a mechanical chuckle, as if laughing at my situation.

"Yeah, real funny, asshole," I mumbled and made my way past the yard décor. Halloween decorations have come a long way since I was a kid.

Bus after bus whizzed by as I sat on the corner bench. Packs of gang-banger wanna-be's joked about lifting my suitcases. I milked out a coffee at the corner diner until they kicked me out. There was only one place to go.

Trent flung the door open. His hair looked as if it had been combed with an eggbeater. He wore boxers and nothing else. It was 1:00am.

"Oh...uh, Erica." Trent rubbed his eyes.

Again, I pushed my way into the apartment. "Look, I don't care if your bitch is here. I just need a place to crash for the night, and tomorrow I'll be on my way. I'll sleep on the floor...or maybe on the beanbag chair."

He looked genuinely dumbfounded. I thought it was just because he was rudely awakened. "What bitch?"

I dropped my suitcases. "Yeah, Trent, let's be honest. You cheated on me, didn't you?"

His thin lips formed a crooked *O*.

"You've been showing all the signs. I even—"

"I never cheated on you."

"Then where—" I paused to correct myself just in case Chad hadn't told him about our fling from two nights ago. I would have known about his all-nighter only if I had actually been around, watching and waiting. "Then WHY didn't you return my calls? And why have you been so distant lately?"

"I had a family dilemma. Wade finally had to be committed."

So, Wade had finally lost it. Everyone expected it — it was just a matter of when and how.

"He just started walking down the street with a stolen shopping cart," Trent continued, "grabbing lawn ornaments from yards. Then he got hostile when people approached him. He ended up with a whole cast of characters, including four gnomes who he said were 'going on a permanent vacation' because that Travelocity commercial had 'finally pissed him off.' He ended up pushing an old

lady who tried to wrestle her gnome back. She fell and broke her hip."

Trent made quotes in the air with his fingers when he paraphrased Wade.

"I had to bolt home and be with family for a while. My cell phone fell in the toilet at a rest stop, so there went that." Trent shook his head at what was obviously the trip from hell. His hometown was Minneapolis, about a five-hour drive from our Milwaukee stomping grounds.

"I tried to call you before I left and the line was busy. Then I tried to call you earlier today when I got back and the line was disconnected. *I* should be asking *you* where you've been. I even stopped by your place tonight and some other people were already moving in, so I didn't know what the hell was going on."

"Oh..." My stomach sank. "Is Chad here?"

"He's sleeping. Why?"

"Why didn't HE tell me about the emergency with Wade?"

"I asked him not to tell anybody." Trent had always been protective and somewhat touchy about his disturbed baby brother. "He could have told *you*, though. But Chad's like that. If you don't spell stuff out for him, he doesn't get it."

"Yeah..." I leaned back onto the plaid couch. A spring poked me in the ass. Maybe that was my punishment for letting suspicious intuition take over. Oh, and damn that Chad. He took advantage of me in my time of distress. And damn me for letting him.

"As far as being distant goes, well...I guess I'm just trying to sort things out and get my life together. I don't want to drag you into all my mental baggage."

Crap, not that *mental baggage* line again. I've heard that song and dance from so many guys before who wanted to abruptly end a relationship they were getting bored with. Yet women are supposedly the emotional ones who don't know what we want?

"I think maybe we should just be friends for a while and see how—"

"Look, can I just crash here for a couple days or not? Then I promise I'll be on my way so you can bang some other chick."

Trent's jaw dropped. I reached for my suitcase, as I'd assumed that I'd just talked my way out of place to stay. At that point, I didn't even care. I was tired from lack of sleep and sad about grandma and disgruntled with guys and worried about my fate and pissed off at my landlord. The front hall of Trent's building was roomy, and I think there was a bench...

"You can crash here as long as you need to," Trent said as he stood up and yawned, apparently ready to go back to bed. "I'm sure Chad won't care."

"I'm sure he won't," I mumbled as I stretched out on the couch and got comfy.

"What?" Trent asked.

"Nothing." I positioned my head awkwardly on the stuffed arm of the couch.

"I'll get a pillow for you."

I had my own pillow, but was too tired to dig it out. I dozed off before Trent returned

Marlene had yet to take another bite of her salad. Her fork remained poised in her hand. She seemed less critical and more captivated by my tale.

"So as you can imagine, I felt like an ass at first for turning out to be the cheater and not the cheat-ee." I emptied a sugar packet into my second cup of coffee. "But after Trent pulled his 'I'm sorting things out now' crap, I didn't feel quite as bad."

"Go on, go on," Marlene waved her fork in small circular motions as if it would make me talk faster.

I woke up the next morning with a very stiff neck and Chad hovering over me.

"Does Trent know you're here?" Chad gasped.

I shot straight up, nearly head-butting him. "Damn, didn't you brush your teeth yet?" His breath was kickin' and it got me off that couch faster than any alarm clock would have.

"Does Trent know you're here?" He repeated, backing off.

"Yeah, who do you think let me in?" I stood up and stretched. I fell asleep in my wool jacket and a full coat of makeup. By morning I was perspiring and my eyelids felt glued together.

"HE let YOU in?" Chad moved his index finger with each word and stared at me as if he couldn't quite comprehend it.

"Why wouldn't he? And YOU — pulling that *'aww baby, let's have a pizza and a sixer'* line knowing damn well he was away on a family emergency." I took off my jacket and felt much better in my cami-style top underneath.

Chad stared at my chest. "Did you tell him about—"

"No. Did you?"

Trent appeared, still in his jammie boxers and messy hair. "Tell me about *what?*"

"Uhh," I finger-combed my own tresses.

"I couldn't tell Erica about your emergency with Wade because you told me not to and she felt bad like you were cheating on her and I felt sorry for her and..."

Over the next minute, Chad blurted out every detail of our fling. It felt like an hour. Trent's expression grew to that of someone who had witnessed a gruesome auto accident.

He finally sat at the kitchen table with his back towards us. "You both suck," was all he came up with at the moment.

I sneered at Chad. He shrugged.

Trent finally got up from the tattered vinyl chair. I was startled by the harsh noise of the casters rolling against the linoleum.

"You know, we still have the issue of Erica being homeless," Chad said.

"She can stay here until she finds a place. Then I want you both out," Trent muttered before I could come up with a rebuttal.

Trent went back to his room. He did have the final say; it was his place first until he invited his down and out pal Chad to occupy the spare bedroom for some extra cash.

Chad flashed a sheepish smile at me. I flipped him off and took a shower.

"Look, Trent," I told him later over a couple of beers, "I honestly thought you were cheating on me, and I was pissed. I had nothing to lose at the moment."

Trent snorted into his bottle of Berry Weiss.

"I'm sorry, Trent. I really am. But what do you care? You ended up dumping me anyway."

"I didn't dump you."

"Yes you did. What do you call it?"

He stared at his bottle. "Why did you buy chick beer?"

"Berry doesn't mean girly. Give it a chance."

"I did, and it's lame. Here," Trent dug into his pocket and tossed a twenty at me. "Run to the Open Pantry and get some real beer."

The Open Pantry was only two blocks away. I never minded the *you fly, I'll buy* thing. With my poor ass, it worked to my advantage. I picked up a twelver and headed to the guy's pad.

"Here you go. Macho, testosterone, Nascar-lovin' dude brew." I set a twelver of Bud on the concrete steps that led up to his building.

"Nascar?" Trent seemed to shudder at the word. "You know, Pabst or Miller would have been fine, too."

He ripped the cardboard and grabbed a can away from its eleven brothers. With his twelve-pack, that left me with four more bottles of

Berry Weiss for the evening. I watched Trent as he sucked down his beer and stared into the distance.

"You drank too much and ended up in the sac with Trent!" Marlene said as if predicting the next plot twist in a movie. Her salad wilted as we conversed.

I dropped the onion ring I held. "You're no fun."

"You're talking to a screenplay writer, you know."

Marlene never wrote any screenplays that had actually been produced into movies - blockbuster or indie. Her big flick was a reality-spoof that involved her friends as the cast walking around Greenwich Village, muttering their observations of life.

"Anyway..." I pushed my plate aside.

The next morning, Trent groaned, rolled over and flung his arm around me in a sleepy stupor. I wriggled free and wrapped my robe around me. Famished, I headed to the kitchen.

Chad had been making what he thought was French toast. He struggled to keep a piece of saturated bread intact as he placed it on a skillet. The kitchen smelled smoky, like after a campfire is put out for the evening.

"Morning!" He was fully dressed and acted as if he knew what he was doing as bread smoldered on the skillet behind him. I glanced at another piece of charred toast on the counter.

I crushed out my cigarette and grabbed the spatula away from him. The piece of toast on the grill couldn't be saved. I investigated the soupy mixture with a spoon. "What's in here?"

"Eggs and milk." Chad mixed a couple shots of Bailey's Irish Cream in his coffee.

"Ratio?" I asked, still looking at the mixture drip off the spoon as I held out my own coffee cup. It was from Mount Rushmore and

displayed a photo of the four heads. It was from a childhood family vacation and one of the rare times of harmony between my mother and father and Marlene and me.

"Uhh, one egg, and some milk. Okay, a lot of milk." Chad emptied the rest of the bottle into my mug. It was half full of Bailey's.

"Nice try — you're not getting me loopy before noon." I pushed the mug away. "Now get out the eggs, milk, and vanilla and we'll make some *real* French toast." My grandmother, before cancer overtook her, was one of the best cooks around, using old-country recipes from her memory.

"Vanilla?" Chad questioned.

After cleaning Chad's mess, I made French toast the right way, which Chad and Trent gobbled up as if they had never eaten before. I bellied up to the table as well, as it had been a few days since I'd eaten anything other than Ramen noodles. I guess that was the beginning of the mutual dependence between the guys and me.

Job-hunting made me want to cry. I tried to stay upbeat, despite one application after another and no return calls. Temp agencies provided only dead leads. In the meantime, I was like a housewife with two husbands. The guys had a hot meal every night and the apartment was clean. Occasionally Trent threw it in my face that I was living there for free, but I shut him up by spending the night in his bedroom instead of the couch.

Other than that, I was supposed to be just The Girl Crashing at the Pad, until Chad had a wedding to attend.

Trent was in Minneapolis that weekend.

I was lying on the couch reading an old copy of *Vogue* that Trent lifted from his doctor's waiting room. Chad appeared in his suit.

"Wow!" I sat up and whistled.

"Is my tie straight?" He adjusted it as if there was a mirror in front of him.

"It's fine. Leave it alone."

He put his hands in his pockets, looking like a downtown businessman.

"And you sacrificed the goatee to Mr. Bic," I said, eyeing him up. He did look hot.

"So, what are you doing tonight?" His hands were still in his pockets. He rocked lightly on his feet.

It then occurred to me that I would actually have the place to myself. I could do anything — take an hour-long bubble bath, watch whatever I wanted on TV, pig out on junk food while nobody was watching — the possibilities were endless.

"Just hang out here and mind the place, I guess."

"Want to come?" Chad glanced at the floor while he spoke.

The bath, the television, the potato chips, my magazine...it all seemed in another place at another time. I had a chance to go out!

"When do you want to leave?"

"In a little while." Chad looked at his watch.

I slapped on a fresh coat of makeup and put on my only dress. I cleaned my faux-jeweled necklace from Trent. How it shined! I was amazed by how it glistened as I held it up to the light. I looked at it closely.

"Almost ready?" Chad called.

I snapped the necklace on and we were off.

Champagne flowed and we danced until midnight. Chad introduced me to all at his cousin's wedding as "his friend Erica." They all nodded like "yeah, *friend*, right." I guess I was just a friend until we got home, both drunk on free tap beer and a good time.

Chad and I both happened to be light sleepers. Trent's jangling keys awoke us at eight the next morning. We heard the front door creak open. We heard a bag drop to the floor. We heard Trent walk down the hall. Whether he was headed to the bathroom or to his room, he would have to pass Chad's room.

Chad hadn't bothered to shut his bedroom door the night before.

"Pretend you're asleep," Chad whispered as he tried to pull the sheet over my head.

I batted it away. "Give it up."

Trent did a double take at the door. He shook his head and marched back towards the living room. We heard things getting slammed around.

Chad jumped out of bed and put his robe on. He headed towards the living room.

I decided that pulling the covers over my head wasn't such a bad idea after all.

"You decided to leave Minneapolis at three in the morning?" I heard Chad ask. "Uhh, that's kinda strange."

"Yeah, so?" Trent snapped.

"Why did you throw Erica's stuff all over? Or kick my guitar off its stand?"

"How the hell do you expect me to act?"

"You know, you *did* dump her, so why are you—"

"I didn't mean to dump her!"

"So, you think she'll just be your yo-yo?"

The guys continued to argue. I kept Chad's striped sheet tented over my head. Why bother going out here? My presence would have only worsened things. It already has.

The front door slammed.

I heard footsteps and felt someone sit on the bed. I peeked out.

"You can come out now. He split for a while." Chad gently pulled the covers from my face.

"He tossed my stuff around?"

"Yeah, it's kind of a mess out there. Some of your personal stuff—"

I jumped out of Chad's bed with his sheet wrapped around me and dug through my pile of stuff. I found my heart shaped tin unopened and intact. Relieved, I put my robe on and picked up my things. My privacy survived Trent's rampage.

Marlene had yet to take another bite of her food.

"I guess you're right. I am a hooker. Sex helped me obtain something; in this case, shelter. It wasn't intentional, though."

She hung her head and played with her straw, as if she had regretted calling me a hooker. "You know, if you would have just called me, I would have picked you up and brought you to New York. The offer still stands."

Finished my last onion ring. "Thank you, but no. I promise I'll visit."

"So you're going to just stay—"

"No. Do you know why I was so worried about finding my heart shaped tin?"

"Because it was grandma's?"

"That too, but..." I fished through my purse and pulled out the tin. I opened the lid a crack, and glanced around. The only people in the diner was the waitress, who was watching a local newscast on a small TV with a grainy picture, and a sleepy-looking elderly man at the counter. Confident that no thieves or thugs were within earshot, I opened the lid wider in Marlene's direction. My ticket to freedom glistened from inside.

"Was that grandma's?"

"No. This is that necklace Trent gave me. He found it at an abandoned house his crew had painted. He grabbed it for me because he knew how I liked 'all that antique crap.' After cleaning it up, I had that 'antique crap' appraised, and the necklace is real diamonds."

Marlene folded her arms and smiled.

"I'm headed to the jeweler's after we finish eating. My rent for a studio apartment will be covered for two months, plus I have a few bucks for food and a phone. Obviously Trent never suspected it was real, or he would have hocked it himself. Also, I finally landed an entry-level job at a dentist's office. Filing and stuff. I start Monday."

"Good for you. Need a ride to the jeweler?"

My things were gathered and packed before the guys got home. I tried to compose a "Dear Johns" letter, but no matter how I wrote it,

it didn't come out right.

So I left. Trent and Chad both returned from work around the same time. They would come home, and there would be no hot dinner. No clean apartment. No babe lounging on the couch. I tried to imagine their expressions as I walked down the streets towards my new place.

I also wondered if they'd miss me. Not just my cooking, not just my maid services, not just the bedroom specialties, but *me*. If I ever bump into them at the neighborhood Open Pantry, I'll have to ask them.

